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ABSTRACT

Much of what characterizes, critiques, defines and describes an educator's profession and practice occurs in the form of documents which get delivered every day to the faculty mailroom. These documents are connected to cultural processes which establish hierarchies of power, exclude individuals from decision making, and foster an illusion of the free flow of apparently vital information necessary for full participation in the community. To investigate its rhetorical ramifications, all of the mail received by two professors of English over a 2-year period was studied (normally, much of it is ignored). Generally, institutional mail fosters an institutional "docility," a term, like document, which is rooted in the verb "to teach." The sheer amount of mail obscures, perhaps deliberately, any solicited invitation to participate in decision making, thus fostering a fictive perception of an elaborate and efficient communications network. Institutional power structures are emphasized by the numerous "literacy demands" which call for certain responses. Two examples are the personnel activity form, in which faculty must account for 100% of their time, and student evaluations of faculty, which engender elaborate protocols governing the transfer of power. Finally, the language of universities' documents speaks of chains of literacy demands extending beyond the confines of the university to government and industry. In this way, such documents as mission statements and long-range plans can potentially become powerful instruments of oppression. (HB)

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"We Get Mail: Documenting the Rhetoric of Our Academic Institutions." Paper presented on the panel, "We Get Mail: Documenting the Rhetoric of Our Academic Institutions" at the Conference on College Composition and Communication, Cincinnati, 21 Mar. 1992.

Much of what advertises, articulates, categorizes, characterizes, critiques, defines, describes, reflects, and tabulates our profession and our practice occurs in the form of documents which get delivered every day to the faculty mailroom. One of the principal thoroughfares for our day to day communication with administrators, colleagues, and students, the faculty mailboxes are also terminals for a great quantity of the institution's textual freight. In both the documents and the site of their distribution, Michael Blitz, with whom I have been studying academic rhetoric for several years now, and I perceive an important intersection of the many demands that constitute a powerful exchange network within the institution. These demands do not originate in or with the department or institution as a whole. Indeed, Michael and I first determined to examine these documents precisely because we sensed their connection to cultural processes which establish hierarchies of power, exclude majorities of individuals from decision-making considerations, and which, paradoxically, foster an illusion of the free-flow of apparently vital information necessary for full participation of and in the community.

Our mailboxes and the materials we find in them function as a site both of our practice(s) and our personal and collective struggles to invoke a sense of professional community. The image we have, not only of the educational institution as a whole, but of institutional divisions, departments, personnel, and students is, to a great extent, determined by these documents. We see them, also, as one of the most perceptible sites at which the institution's "autobiography" is composed. The documents which we are discussing serve as one of the ways the academic institution characterizes itself, and by

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implication, us. Our perceptions of ourselves as educators is, in real ways, dictated to us by the discourse of these documents (we analyze one form of such "dictation" in section IX below). We want to explore the ways that the literacy demands contained in the intra and interdepartmental documents we receive shape how we think about and use our time; how we create and enact classroom practices, research activities, budgets, family lives, relationships with students, colleagues and administration; and how we represent our institutions when we move about the profession, such as when we visit other academic institutions or speak at professional conferences. We want to raise questions regarding the ways in which these literacy demands work to create and maintain possessors and non-possessors of power in the academic environment. And we want to propose that these documents and the literacy demands they reflect enact and comprise an important body of information which circumscribes and inscribes that power.

The documents that "arrive" in our department mailboxes supply us with little histories in the form of decisions that we have had some/no part in making. Sometimes they remind us of what we need to do to *be* a part of an event, a decision, and thus to become a figure in the institution's socio-history. Some contain, in accordance with one encrusted eighteenth-century meaning of the word, a "warning." These warnings may take the form of a statement of consequences for an unfulfilled request for action, such as returning a document to an administrative source on time. Other warnings remind us of who we must and must not allow to sit in on our classes. Some documents we receive, or that we ourselves make, contain stories about ourselves and/or our students, objectified by statistics, such as reports of grades, transfers, successes, failures, budgets and ethics. Several times each semester, we are asked to update class enrollment lists, report on "problem" students, and keep track of the dates on which particular students may have stopped attending.

While many of the literacy demands in departmental documents concern student accountability and progress, others ask that we provide evidence of our own participation

in college-wide activities, professional presentations, curriculum development, student advisement, grant-seeking activities, even in extra-curricular (i.e. sports, entertainment, club) events. Both of us have to make documents that list and/or prove the fruits of our scholarship, such as articles and books published and papers delivered, to our programs, departments and universities. We are regularly requested to report any outside employment and to submit such reports for a compatibility check by administration. To fuel this article, the two of us have pooled the materials that we have received in our mailboxes during the last two years. Obviously, some of this material has been lost--accidently or deliberately. But the following is at least a partial list of our actual inter/intradepartmental mail:

add/drop procedure notices
advertisements/notices about courses from other departments, our writing centers, etc., for us to distribute to our students
calls for action (i.e. faculty votes, and particularly notices directed to one population but distributed to all)
calls for charitable contributions
calls for papers, articles, presentations
calls for/lists of library acquisitions
catalogs of office supplies (generally unbudgeted)
class lists and explanations of reporting procedures for aiding administration in the updating of class lists, placements
course syllabi and bibliographies from our colleagues
departmental directories of committee assignments and academic specialties
departmental newsletters
directories containing summaries of university reports and the offices where they are available
doctoral exam materials and dissertations
duplicate sets of faculty scheduling cards, which we fill out, including our office hours, and post outside our offices and return to administration
employment papers (contracts, renewals, benefits)
exam procedure/information notices
faculty surveys
grade reporting forms (with explanations/recommendations)
grant opportunities
information about funding of conference travel plans
information and articles about our profession
invitations to address students or groups
invitations to administration-sponsored functions (breakfasts, receptions) held sometimes during office hours, which are set aside for students, or after hours, which are set aside for personal life)
invitations to teach additional courses or classes, sometimes for little or no remuneration
letters of congratulation from administrators on the occasion of a publication, grant award, professional paper, etc.

manuscripts from colleagues requesting response
memos regarding how to "handle"--or "manage"--particular kinds of
student "cases" (i.e. cheaters, transfers, victims, discipline problems, students with health problems)
minutes from meetings
newsletters of what other colleagues on other campuses in our
university system(s) are publishing
notices of changes in curriculum
notices of colleague's readings/performances/lectures
notices of decisions made by governing bodies
notices of faculty research and professional development programs at
our/other universities
notices of meetings (open, committee, etc.)
notices of visiting scholarship
observations and evaluations of colleagues (assigned duties and our own)
outside employment justifications
reports on program and/or degree review by administrators or outside evaluators
requests from students for evaluations/recommendations
requests to pick up packages
special reports to be made by faculty on specific students (i.e. those mentioned above plus academic probationers, athletes, counseling clients, repeaters)
statements of long-range planning (departmental and university-wide, created both by committee, individual administrator, etc.)
student activities calenders
student evaluations of faculty, which are read by administrators to assist in employment decisions, promotion, choice of courses for faculty members
teaching schedule preferences forms
union materials
university calendars
university handbooks
university newspapers (alumni, student and staff/faculty)
university/local telephone directories
workload report forms (i.e. the Pennsylvanian "Snyder Amendment"
form and institutional reporting forms used to justify salary).

We get too much mail. We can't read it all, certainly not as closely as we read other things. As one of our colleagues commented, "I have to empty my mailbox once or twice a day just to make room for the next day's junk." On the matter of what to do with materials arriving in the office mail, another of our colleagues described his "sophisticated filing system for school-mail": his examination copies of texts "go to the book heap in the corner of my office"; the memos all go into the "memo heap, to be scanned at the end of the semester to see what I've missed"; and everything else "that doesn't look like a check or promotion to full professor, I pride myself in depositing in the recycling bins in the hall." But we have tried, for this study, to retrieve and read as much of it as possible. What we

discover is that much of the information that flows through our mailboxes fosters, not only an institutional literacy, but also an institutional "docility"--a term, which, like "document," is rooted in the verb "to teach." Indeed, in order to meet at least most of the demands made on us as literacy educators, we have often quite docilely glanced through a stack of memos, made a quick mental or calendar note of one or two specific items, and put the pile aside or thrown it away before moving on to our classrooms, committee meetings, student appointments, or our own document production. It seems to us that much of what stands as inter/intradepartmental communication actually serves less to connect disciplines and programs within the institution than to isolate and insulate departments and individuals, not only from other departments, but, paradoxically, from many of the processes by which institutional practice and policy are decided. The convenience of learning from a memo that major decisions have been voted upon and enacted often preempts faculty members' initiatives to find ways to become part of those very decision-making processes. Of course, many institutional communiques solicit input and participation in such processes. But we are suggesting that any such invitation can be easily, perhaps deliberately, obscured by the number and quality of the documents of which it becomes merely another example. Perhaps more significantly, we suspect that the perception that an elaborate communications network invites social and professional action is part of the necessary fiction that the institution tells and that its employees come to tell about it.

As teachers of writing, language, reading, *literacy*, we understand the term "literacy demand" to suggest explicit and/or implicit ways that specific documents call for particular responses--specific things we are to teach and ways to teach them. Literacy demands call for compliance with a particular program or ideology. They request affiliation, favorable interpretation and subsequent supportive action. Literacy demands instruct us in subsequent production, reproduction and circulation of institutional documents which will, themselves, make new and/or different and /or the same demands as those to which they are a response. *Literacy demands demand literacy*, and as we are arguing, they demand

and teach a very particular kind of literacy, which means, also, that they do not recognize other kinds of literacy.

In his work on imperatives, Nicholas J. Moutafakis cites "the Greek notion of *diataso* , which means 'to set, arrange, to set in order, . . . to appoint to do or be . . . '" (147). This may be a useful way to think of the documents which comprise one of the more powerful and unexamined sets of literacy demands in the institution. These documents supply information and request or order affiliation. They also arrange the institution, set it in *order*. The fact that so many documents are addressed "To:" us, reappoints us to our place within our universities and teaches us what occupying that place demands of us, as well as what we can demand of others. The academic institution is, itself, a literacy demand which our culture makes upon its citizens. The institution's existence serves as a reminder to its employees and students and to the communities it serves--and who serve it--that literacy is both available and exclusive.

Out of the sedimentation of individual and thus often invisible literacies within the academy comes the byproduct which is visible, audible and hermetically institutional Literacy. And we mean a "Literacy" in spite of the many individuals who read and write and speak into and out of the academy. We are referring here to a Literacy that speaks *as* a shifty subjectivity--shifty because it is both transient and tricky; it moves among the documents which are its instruments even as it maintains domination over those who cannot keep up with it to master it. The literacy demands inherent in institutional documents encourage us to be alert and responsive even as they set us in our places beneath the gaze of an elusive "I." Every literacy demand is, in other words, a minute and momentous pedagogy.

From the mounds of sample documents, we kept returning to a few specific, particularly troubling ones. Among these, for example, is a personnel activity report in which faculty members are to account for the *percentage* of their time spent doing professionally relevant work. This form, we are told, must reflect 100% of the time we

devote to work in our profession. At the bottom of the column in which we are to place our numbers, the "TOTAL EFFORT" has already been summed up for us.

The nine categories of effort begin with "Instruction." If one believes, as the two of us do, that virtually all our work efforts inform what we do as classroom teachers, we ought to indicate that 100% of our time is spent on instruction. That, however, would leave loud blanks on the form which, for untenured faculty, might result in an unfavorable review for renewal. Fortunately, most of our work also informs what we do as researchers. A number of spaces have been provided for our account of research projects. But research itself has been broken down as "departmental research (unsponsored)," then as "organized research." Organized research is that which has received "foundation" funding, as well as a "foundation project #," and for which the form provides three spaces. In addition, we are asked to account for "other sponsored activity" which, again, must be referenced by "foundation project #'s" for which three more spaces are provided. Clearly, in the absence of foundation funding and project numbers, all other research is "unsponsored," unsupported, and non-specific. We can safely say that the vast majority of the research and scholarship that the two of us do is unsponsored. To indicate this on the form, then, requires that we leave most or all of the six sponsored spaces blank. The remainder of the spaces in which we are to list percentages of time spent are: "Other institutional activity," "Departmental Administration," (4 spaces), "Proposal Preparation," "General Administration," and "Student Administration and Services." After we have reached the 100% projection, we are to sign a small affidavit in which we "confirm" that the "distribution" of our enumerated activities "represents a reasonable estimate of our work performed by me during the stated period for which I am paid an annual salary." Although it may seem arch of us to say so, it occurs to us, precisely because we are not asked to account for them, that our annual salary must *not* cover any and all of the other things we do as education faculty.

These, then, are the only categories by which one may define and account for the time one spends working. Why is the category "instruction" so silent relative to the space allotted for funded research? Why is unsponsored research merely one line on the form? What, precisely, does "unsponsored" mean? Obviously, the term refers to the absence of grant dollars (in spite of whatever percentage of time one has spent in "proposal preparation"). But it also points up a powerful ideology reflective of our society's economic imperatives: those efforts supported--and thus *supportable*--by government/corporate/business dollars are more significant than those pursued without the auspices of some form of institutional sponsorship. Finally, as one colleague put it, where is the space on such a form in which to indicate the hours spent filling out forms which demand the trivialization of our efforts?

Another document which we know is familiar in one form or another, to most of our colleagues, is the form for student evaluation of faculty. The directions to faculty in this document are often solemn. In the samples we examined, these directions are also laden with problems inherent in the demands they make upon teachers and students. For example, in one form instructors are to "appoint" one student to "supervise the distribution" of the evaluation forms. Power is thus transferred for this particular occasion. However, the appointee does not actually receive this memo, but instead receives directions via the teacher who is in possession of the Provost's directions. Administration communicates to faculty, faculty to students. A subsequent direction presents a potentially dangerous scenario. The teacher must tell the appointee that the latter is to "report any coercion to the Office of the Provost." The instructor must also, presumably, explain to the appointee what this "coercion" would consist of. "Confidentiality is assured," the student is told by the instructor who has been "told" by the "Office of the Provost." But if coercion were, in fact, reported, someone would have to report it; the appointee is the only informer. How many students would not fear reprisal from the instructor who is reported (the typical fate of the "whistle-blower" in our society is well known)? How can confidentiality be

assured? Whose assurance? Does the student-appointee have the freedom to refuse such an assignment? Ultimately, the student-clerk is to collect and deliver (with accompanying signature-verification) the evaluation forms to one administrative office where they will be collated and then re-delivered to the Provost's Office. That office then promises to deliver the data to, quite *literally*, the terminal, the Computer Center where it will become, we understand, part of the the body of information which is us.

But before any of this happens, instructors are asked to read a prepared statement to students. Thus, the administrative demands are voiced by proxy through teachers. Whether in agreement or dispute, teachers are required to tell students that the evaluation process demanded by the institution "serves, then, as a means of enabling instructors to improve their teaching techniques, and it provides an opportunity for outstanding teaching to be recognized." We suggest that it also demands that students produce a pseudo-critique of the literacy demands made of them during the course. We say "pseudo" not because we doubt the students' honesty or desire to make meaningful evaluative statements about the nature of the instruction, and the instructor, in their course, but because we cannot imagine that an institution which recognizes only specific kinds of discourse as "literate" will be able to *read* these evaluations critically and meaningfully if they reflect any kind of *resistance* to the standardization of language, the imposition of hidden agendas, or the trivialization of learning as an *academic imperative*. We also gather, from the prepared statement in this form--and from what is missing in it-- that teachers are *not* to point out to students that their evaluations of teachers might also be contributing factors in an instructor's overall process of seeking renewal or tenure.

We are also struck by *how* the language of our universities' documents speaks of chains of literacy demands extending beyond the confines of the university to government and to our industrial late-capitalist society as a whole. One of our universities has a committee that has issued, as part of a long-range planning document, a "Mission Statement." In it, the committee writes that the university "has the responsibility to include

within its concern the needs of the nation as a whole and those of the international community at large so far as its resources allow." While we recognize both the difficulty and meaningfulness of this committee's work, planning, with limited resources for a complex future, we also wonder how this positioning of the university in relation to government, authorizes the literacy demands the university makes? In what ways does the application of government authority implicate the literacy demands that the academy makes in the inequities and oppressive actions of the state? What if one of the "needs of the nation" is the production of "functionally literate" citizens who will work a lifetime at minimum wage, or the importation of "illiterate" aliens who work for even less? And what sort of restrictions does such a chain of literacy demands place on professors and students? Are we teachers to fulfill this "mission?" Are we to limit the literacies we develop with students to those the university/government authorize? Do we all define "critical thinking" (a term from the document) and "quality students"--what is a non-quality student?--as the makers of this document and as the state legislature do, as the "international community" does? How do they define "literacy?"

And what of students? If they attend a "state" university because it is, for academic and economic reasons, their only option, do they then have, like their university, "the responsibility to include within [*their*] concern the needs of the nation as a whole and those of the international community at large so far as [*their*] resources allow?" What does this mean to *their* futures? What if they determine that the "needs of the nation" would be met by making Black English a dialect of equal value to Standard English in the university, in the State? What if they decided that the state could best be served by the radical disruption of its possessive individualist ideology and its late-capitalist economy? Are we to make sure they don't reach such conclusions? Are we to make sure they don't even think them? Is that one of the literacy demands made on us?

If the aim of the committee and the students is to shape the future in light of the "needs of the nation," the question of "whose needs and whose future?" becomes even

more acute for the people put in the role of fulfilling that demand. Some educators already recognize that they are caught between wanting to encourage their students to think critically about that future and wanting to keep their teaching jobs or maintaining their places of employment. Are we to fulfill a set of standards that do not address or recognize us? Are we to design courses that rehearse a future predicted by the mission of the college? According to the long-range planning document, the answer to these questions is "yes," that is, if we want entrance into what it calls "the international community at large." Such an end, if it is to have any value at all, must be seen as an end with infinite possibilities, but this kind of heterogeneity is precisely what the monologic biography of the institution excludes. Literacy is a social construct; it is an instrument of the academic institution. It is also, potentially, a powerful instrument of oppression. We think that collaboration, social action, creative resistance and intervention are ways that we, all of "us," can and do revise the stories which conserve inequities in our profession.

Works Cited

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